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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S VISIT TO VINH LONG

1. SUMMARY: On May 5, 2003, Ambassador Burghardt, DPO, and Conoff traveled to Vinh Long province in the Mekong Delta with Catholic Relief Services (CRS) Country Representative Chris Gilson. The Ambassador met with representatives of the provincial People's Committee and Union of Friendship Organizations (UFO) before visiting two villages where CRS is building new homes for flood victims. Religious leaders have been allowed to play a small role in the project, which is an encouraging signal about the government's attitude. END SUMMARY.

2. Arriving in Vinh Long, the Ambassador noted that it had not changed much since his last visit to the province 30 years ago. Although Vinh Long is the second largest exporter of rice in Vietnam (with the U.S. and Iraq as major clients), it remains one of the poorest provinces in the country and has an annual GDP per capita of \$330 USD. The majority of people live in rural areas and rely on agriculture as their main source of income. The province illustrates the relatively slow rate of development and lack of infrastructure in the delta region, which suffers regularly from flooding during the annual rainy season.

3. The Ambassador visited two villages where CRS is building elevated houses for flood victims. The average income falls below \$175 USD in these villages, which are inhabited by people of Khmer origin. Villagers gave the Ambassador a warm welcome and appeared quite happy with their new homes. Gilson expressed satisfaction with the success of the project and said that by the end of 2003, CRS will have built over 1,100 houses in Vinh Long. CRS began working in the province after the flooding in 2000 and has used this project to build a better relationship with the Vietnamese government in the south where its activities are more restricted than in the northern region of the country. CRS hopes it has established valuable contacts that will lead to future cooperation on more extensive projects.

4. Phan Van Dau, First Vice Chairman of the Vinh Long People's Committee, emphasized the poverty in the province and expressed gratitude for the CRS projects. He said he wanted to expand cooperation with CRS and other American NGOs. Noting that there had been bitter fighting in the area during the war, Dau said the province understood it was time to look to the future and develop good relations with the U.S. A businessman who previously worked for a State Owned Enterprise in the rice trade, Dau said the province was interested in working with the Consulate to attract American companies. The Ambassador encouraged him to reach out to overseas Vietnamese as an investment source. Dau noted that Vinh Long is located on the regular tourist track of the Mekong Delta but that the number of tourists in the province has decreased 20 to 30 percent as a result of the SARS epidemic.

5. During the trip, the Ambassador had an interesting discussion with Tran Van Khai, Vice Chairman of the Vinh Long Union of Friendship Organizations, about Decree No. 7 issued at the Ninth Party Congress on the relationship between the government and religious groups and minorities. Khai was preparing to take part in meetings that are being held throughout Vietnam to educate cadre about the decree so they can make sure it is implemented in their localities. Khai claimed that this decree was a confirmation of the GVN's liberalization toward religious groups. He emphasized that the Communist party needed to utilize the strengths of religious organizations and encourage their participation in government. The CPV needs new membership and cannot afford to exclude religious groups, he added.

6. Gilson said he has noticed the government's changing attitude toward religious groups through his work in Vinh Long. Each village holds popular assemblies to select the families who will receive CRS houses. Religious leaders, including Catholic clergy, take part in these meetings and their advice about their parish members is often followed. According to both Gilson and Khai, neither the government nor the party has a role in the decision-making process. Gilson also said this is the first time CRS has had the church as a partner on a project in Vietnam and that local government officials have been comfortable with this relationship thus far.

7. COMMENT: Despite Khai's claim, it is still unclear how the GOV intends to implement Decree No. 7 on religion and minorities, which has both positive and potentially restrictive elements. Vinh Long leadership, at least, appears to be taking some steps in the right direction by allowing CRS to partner with a Catholic church. Although Vinh Long officials appear eager for additional humanitarian assistance from the U.S., some of the other delta

provincial leaders are reportedly less forthcoming in their dealings with both religious groups and NGOs. END COMMENT.

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